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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SANAA 002345

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PTER](#) [ASEC](#) [ECON](#) [YM](#) [ECON](#) [COM](#) [ENERGY](#)

SUBJECT: FIRST KIDNAPPING IN THREE YEARS RESOLVED QUICKLY

REF: SANAA 2225

Classified By: DCM Nabeel Khoury for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) Summary: Five oil workers were kidnapped on 8/31 in Ma'rib governorate for three hours. The Ma'rib Governor sent in troops who, after brief gunfire, freed the three hostages. All men are safely back in Sanaa. While Post has no/no indication that the kidnapping was terrorist related, it may signal increased tribal restiveness as ROYG security forces are preoccupied with fighting in the north. Post will monitor closely to see if a pattern is emerging in terms of a return to tribal tensions and lawlessness. End summary.

Five Oil Workers Kidnapped for "Lunch"

2. (C) Occidental Petroleum Yemen Manager Richard Schmitt confirmed to Pol/Econ Deputy on 9/1 that one Australian, two Omanis, and two Yemenis were detained for three hours on 8/31 while driving back to Sanaa from the field. Schmitt said that 10 kilometers outside of Ma'rib city a pick-up truck full of armed tribesmen overtook the oil workers' SUV and forced the five men to an "undisclosed location." After lunch the five were moved again. Schmitt stated that the men were employees of a subcontractor of Occidental, the Omani drilling company MB. Schmitt reported that the tribesmen called the MB company and demanded jobs for six of their tribesmen. According to Schmitt, MB used to employ members of the Jedan tribe, which is believed to be responsible for the kidnapping.

3. (C) Once informed of the ransom, Schmitt said representatives from MB called the Governor of Ma'rib as well as his chief of security, to request a quick resolution. According to Schmitt, the Governor's men moved in and resolved the situation peacefully. A Yemen Hunt security official told Pol/Econ deputy that upon the military's arrival there was a brief exchange of gunfire. Characterizing the incident as an "aggressive kidnapping," Schmitt asserted that the event is not "benign." Schmitt will press the ROYG for "immediate, aggressive action" against the perpetrators. Yemen Hunt said that they are monitoring the situation carefully, but have not yet moved to change their security posture.

ROYG Downplaying Incident

4. (C) German CDA told Pol/Econ Deputy on 8/31 that the National Security Bureau (NSB) is attempting to spin the story as a simple robbery, and commented that in his opinion it is "definitely a kidnapping." The Governor of Ma'rib denied to al-Sawha net that the kidnapping took place. A prominent Ma'rib Sheikh Rabish told Saba news agency that the Australian engineer was simply hosted by the "Jed'an tribe in Ma'rib for lunch."

Spike in Tribal Violence?

5. (C) The kidnapping comes on the heels of three tribal incidents involving expats in the past six weeks. All incidents occurred in the al-Jawf governorate and none of the incidents resulted in injuries.

-- On 7/27 American contractors of the Adventist Relief and Development Agency were fired upon while driving in the region.

-- On 8/4 Embassy officers were waived off from visiting a northern village with gunfire;

-- On 8/31 two Yemeni contractors refused to stop to pick up a tribesman who shot up the car the men were riding in.

In addition to the ongoing conflict in Sa'da (reftel), Post is aware of another stand-off between the ROYG and tribes in the al-Jawf governorate. Press reports indicate that the government is holding one tribal leader and the tribes are holding a government soldier hostage. Al-Jawf tribal sheikhs

told an Amcit NGO worker that the government is afraid to release the tribesman for fear he will join al-Houthi in his conflict against the government in the North.

16. (C) Comment: The successful resolution of the kidnapping demonstrates the ROYG's resolve to maintain its record of no westerners kidnapped since 2001. Tribal kidnapping to gain jobs, schools or other economic incentives is a tradition rooted in Yemeni society. Post does not/not believe this was related to terrorism. However, the fact that this incident occurred while the ROYG is embroiled in an ongoing struggle in Sa'da, when combined with the other incidents against expats described above, indicates renewed tribal muscle flexing in the provinces. Yemen is actively seeking to transform its former "wild west" image into that of a stable, emerging democracy safe for foreign investment. If the tribes return to their previous custom of holding foreigners for ransom (of whatever sort) it will negatively impact on foreign investment so desperately needed in Yemen. Post will monitor such incidents and closely report as appropriate.
End comment.
KRAJESKI